



DekUnu Magazine

November 2020

Abandon

Christopher Paul Brown

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Dek Unu Magazine

Eleven

This is **Dek Unu Magazine**. In Esperanto, *dek unu* means "eleven." Eleven images from a single artist. Eleven artists in eleven solo issues each year.

Dek Unu publishes the work of a new photoartist in each issue. The artist's work and words are featured alone and in individual focus as the sole purpose for each issue of the magazine. Unlike other arts and letters magazines which might look for work from a variety of artists to support an editorial staff's theme, at **Dek Unu**, theme and imagery are always each artist's own.

This Month

Multi-disciplinary artist, Christopher Paul Brown, is a photographer, filmmaker, musician, and writer. He also practices "alchemy," a process by which he converts abandoned industrial sites in Chicagoland's Fox River Valley to the opposite. In his abstract images, the reds, browns, and greys of oxidized metal, broken equipment, and weeds become blues, purples, greens and golds. Solids become transparent. Positives morph into negatives. His work is, according to him, play, and his artistic destinations are completely unknown to him until they appear, by a kind of involute magic, on the screen in front of him. Methods he developed as a performer and producer of improvisational music and experimental film show up again in the ways he inverts, reverses, separates, rephrases, combines, and transforms the parts of his visual compositions. This is art in the moment, not the spawn of photo history. This is not the staid and studied art of the academy; it is both antique and contemporary. It is alchemy.

How does an abandoned Toastmaster factory become an otherworldly vision of both the past and the future? Christopher Paul Brown shows us how.

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Images:

©Christopher Paul Brown



Patient Ninja, Abandon, 2000-2011

Abandon can have positive connotations, such as, "She danced with abandon," or negative, such as, "My father abandoned us when I was two." I like that about the title. It gives it more mileage. All the objects on view here were abandoned. They were abandoned from use, abandoned as trash and abandoned to the elements. The land on which they were tossed was also abandoned. Formerly it was a pristine forest (and source of food), or an orchard or a cow pasture. The land was abandoned from use except as a depository of trash.

Along I came, with my newly mastered medium format camera (formerly a 35mm aficionado). I became interested in creating a portfolio series centered on these artifacts. I felt I knew the history of the region better than most, and I liked how these artifacts supported that history. You could say that I pursued this project with abandon. I trail-blazed and overcame ticks, mosquitoes, heat and humidity. My responsibilities at the time were all collaborative in nature, so the solitude of this project was invigorating. My goal was and is alchemy. I want these abandoned, weathered artifacts, and their setting, to show you their inner beauty.





Two Holes, Abandon, 2000-2011

So what is alchemy? Likely you picture a medieval man laboring to transmute lead into gold. If such a man succeeded, he likely took the secret to his grave. Chemistry is pure process. If five different people make aspirin, the outcome will be identical. In contrast, alchemy depends on the personal power of the person overseeing the process. The lynchpin of modern science is experimentation that can be replicated by other scientists; alchemists recognize that the success of one alchemist is not necessarily transferable to others.

My own interest in alchemy relates to Carl Jung and the surrealists. The idea of gold hidden within a person or thing, and the use of alchemical polarities as a means of releasing this higher energy, is the focus of this series, and of my art. When you view these images, it is my intention that something interesting, something opposite to trash, gains your attention. I have inverted the images. This inversion of polarities is a metaphor for turning trash into beauty. We may not notice the many shades of green surrounding us due to their almost constant presence. These shades of green become just a background. In contrast, these images' inverted colors are rare and capture your attention.





Broken Bird, Abandon, 2000-2011

"They grew up on a surreal frontier; suburbia kissing the edges of rural America. As time passed, the not-so-distant big city expanded, its tentacles stretching and fattening, turning farmland and woods into malls, intersections, and ironically-titled residential housing tracts. As the foxes, deer, and magic fled this place they called home, their sense of unease grew. Poised to leave, to find new reservoirs of magic with which to ply their craft, they rediscovered an old and untainted source, and began hammering on moonlight."

– from the Random Touch CD, Hammering on Moonlight, copyright 2002

I have found pleasure in exploring abandoned areas. Abandoned sections of gravel pits, 50 years on, are distinct, even exotic, ecosystems unto themselves. They are short on topsoil but water and sand are plentiful. Even rusting metal has a beauty, casting weather into the role of artist. These external conditions mirror the slow destructions and traumas every person suffers on this planet, and the revivification of these environments reflects the recoveries many of us have experienced. This is likely what draws me to alchemy. It fosters the confidence that all that's damaged retains the spark of gold within.





Abandon, Abandon, 2000-2011

*the dark and the hidden
our price of admission*

*to the mysterious
and the sublime*

*we surf the illusion
seeking freedom and fusion*

*adrift in a sea
we call mine*

*raised amidst our own sorrow
we toast the you tomorrow*

*that the sundered be whole
in due time*

*- from the Random Touch CD/DVD
The You Tomorrow, 2004*





Metal, Canvas and Flowers, Abandon, 2000-2011

Let me tell you about numerology. Like astrology and palmistry, it reflects cycles, archetypes, and other powerful features saturating ordinary life. I investigated numerology a few decades ago. What I found stunned me. I learned that, based on my birthdate, I was an eleven, which is considered a master number. The master numbers are 11, 22 and 33. 11 is about illumination, 22 about the master builder, and 33 about the avatar. The numbers continue with 44, 55, etc., but birthdates go no higher than 33.

My music collaborator of 48 years passed away last year. We were also photography collaborators back in the 1980s. He, too, was an 11. In addition, he was born exactly 11 months before me. 11 permeated our lives. We both had phone numbers that were 11s, social security numbers that were 11s and even master number street addresses. In 1979, before we knew about numerology, we co-founded the experimental music group *Random Touch*. With its letters transformed into numbers, the word "random" translates into the number 11 and "touch" translates into the number 22; so the name of our group is a 33, the avatar. Numbers, frequency, and vibration are what lie below this manifested world.





Rough Rust and Plants, Abandon, 2000-2011

In my early days as a photographer, I explored two techniques that still appeal to me. One is motion blurring and the second selective focus, showing different parts of an image in varying degrees of sharpness and blur. My early experiments were analog, but I particularly like to abuse features on digital cameras. The digital camera I had before my current camera was a Canon EOS 5D Mark III and I loved to abuse its in-camera HDR feature. Almost all digital cameras can assemble a middle exposure, an underexposure, and an overexposed image via algorithms to make a single image showing an extended range of lights and darks. However, the 5D Mark III's algorithms were unique and produced effects impossible to replicate with Photoshop. I would set the HDR mode and then move the camera around as it clicked off the three pictures. I'd move it forward and back, to the side, or rotate it up to 190 degrees or so. At first, I got mostly gobbledygook, but I began to learn its mysterious ways and, finally, could get a good image about 20 or 25% of the time. My website, near the very bottom, has something called "Fractical Dubuque, 2015" which exhibits these outcomes.





Former Toastmaster Factory, Abandon, 2000-2011

"How wonderful that we have met with a paradox. Now we have some hope of making progress." - Niels Bohr

I suspect that everything close to truth is paradoxical. Paradox also serves as an aspect of mystery. For a long time, I saw polarity as a bar magnet - one extreme pole on each end. Now I see it as a circle. The most sophisticated art can also be the most primitive. I have delved into my unconscious, in part via the book *Initiation into Hermetics* by Franz Bardon. My unconscious is still a trickster to my conscious self, and my conscious self can be a trickster to my unconscious self, but there has been some negotiation between the two. I believe we have agreed to disagree, but that is progress of a sort, yes?

I am not sure there is any point to differentiating between the surprise, serendipity, and synchronicity that arrives via the universe at large and that which arrives via my unconscious. The universe and my unconscious may be two poles of the same polarity. Astrology offers an apt comparison here: the planets don't drive human behavior and human behavior doesn't drive the planets. One is the interior pole and one the exterior pole. They are one polarity and dance to the same tune.



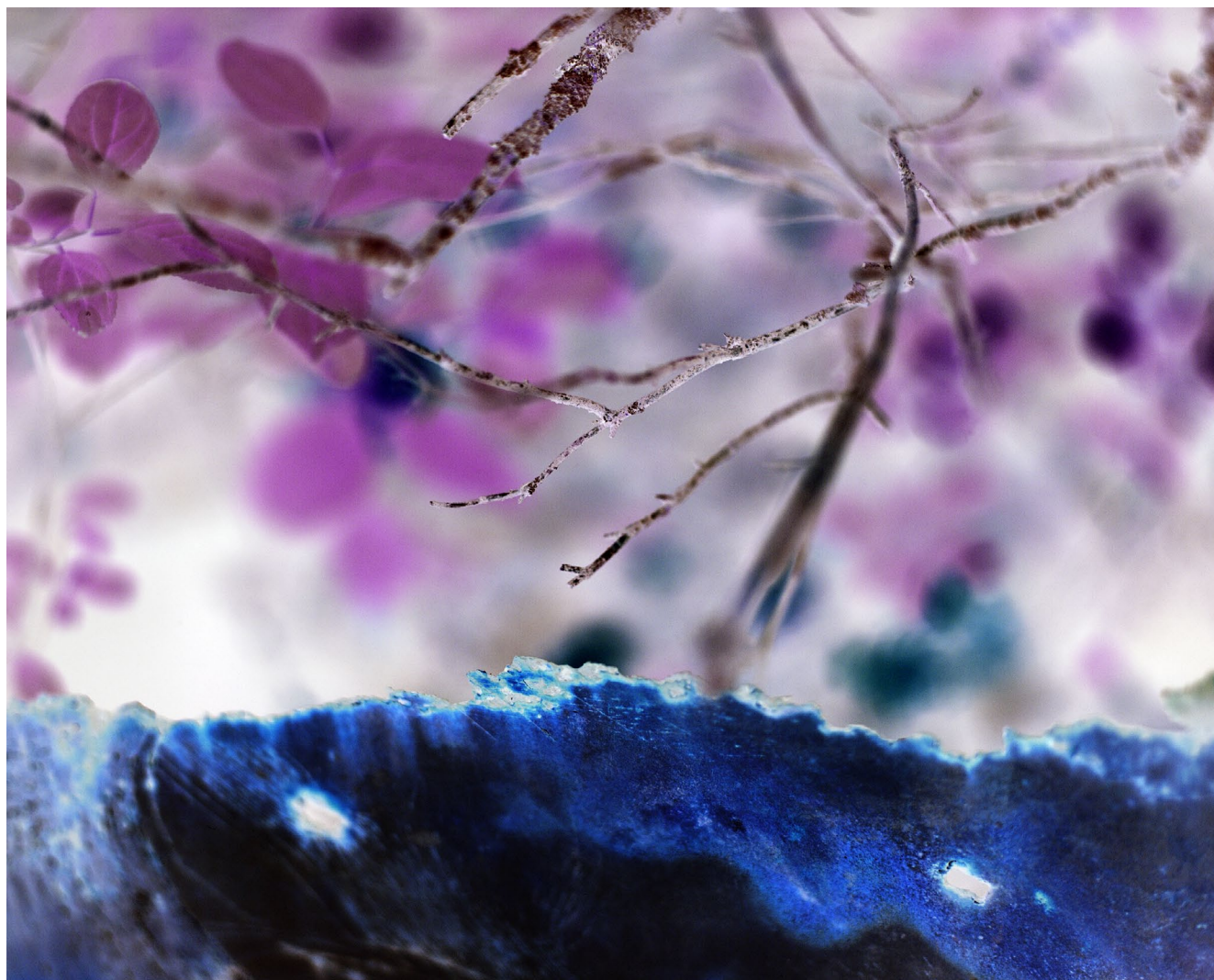


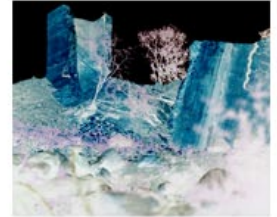
Thick Rusted Metal and Flora, Abandon, 2000-2011

"Ancient metalworkers had no need to understand the molecular and sub-molecular complexities of their steel, bronze, copper, gold, and tin. They invented mystical powers to describe the unknown, while they continued to operate their forges and wield their hammers."

– Frank Herbert, Heretics of Dune

I like to think that some of the work I do with alchemy and polarities will one day be common practices and applied widely in society. I recognize that my uses are primitive and raw; it's inevitable that such new territory would first appear in this manner. One feature, however, that is vital to my work, is the incorporation of mystery. The mystery of the mechanism by which good art is made seems vital, as mystery is one of the most wonderful features of this world. It touches infinity without and infinity within. Living with no mystery whatsoever would be like living with perfect prophecy. With every moment predicted and expected, another key positive feature of this world would be ruined: surprise. I spend much time thinking about the mechanism of creation/discovery. I like to gain apt metaphors, and I'd like to get better at art, but, if it were understood completely, then art as we know it would end.





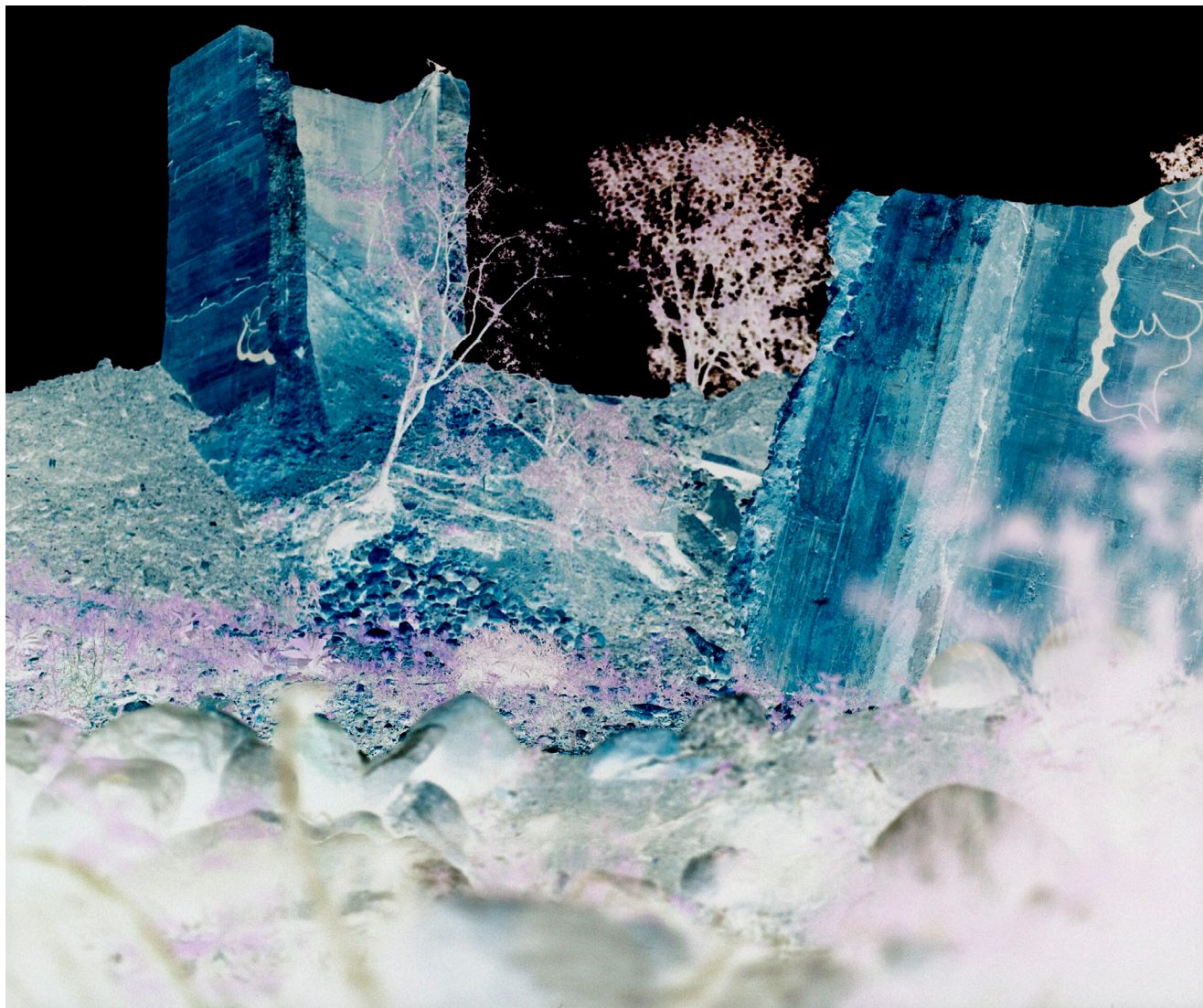
Broken Gravel Pit Train Loader, Abandon, 2000-2011

"The creation of something new is not accompanied by the intellect but by the instinct acting from inner necessity."

- Carl Jung

The intellect is incapable of invention or creation. It has many uses, but this is not one of them. If we look back, beyond the history written by the victors, we can see that most invention came about through the patient trial and error of amateurs, and often by accident. What I call play is also trial and error. I will try crazy things in Photoshop and they fail less often than might be expected. Alchemy stacks the deck in my favor.

I never saw this broken gravel pit structure prior to photographing it around 2008. I had been exploring the three miles of this river valley, between the towns of Algonquin and Carpentersville, for 45 years at that point. How could I overlook it for so long? By following my instinct. I returned to the places I liked best again and again. I knew there were areas I hadn't visited yet, but I viewed them as money in the bank. My exploration was the opposite of rational. I treated my exploration like an eight course meal; I never hurried to arrive at dessert.

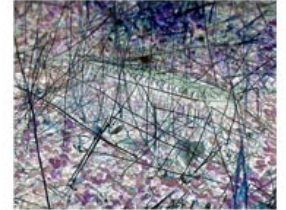




Gravel Pit Structure, Abandon, 2000-2011

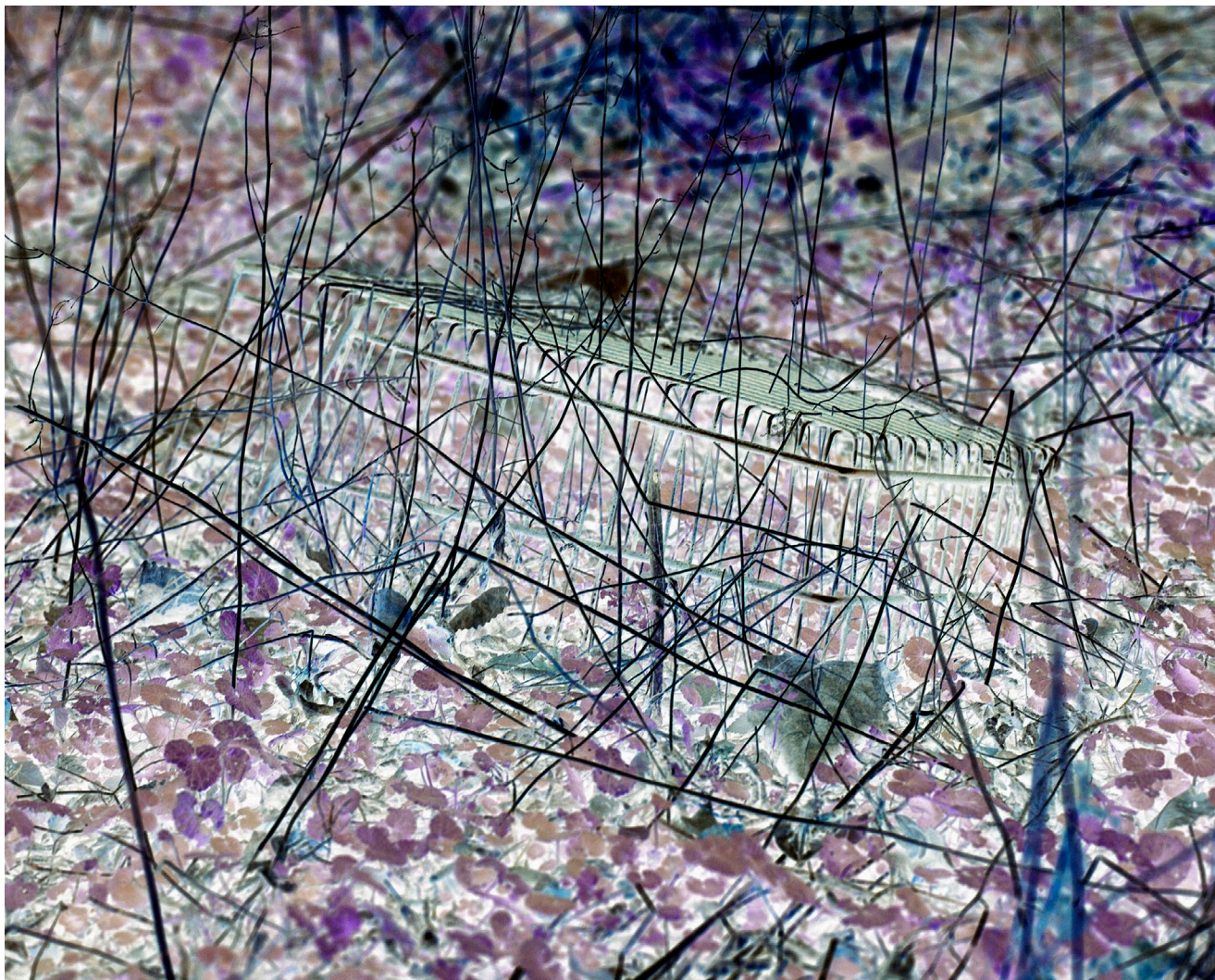
I have always been attracted to the old and the worn. As a kid, everything from old buildings to fossils to ancient photos of my great-grandmother got my attention. I am convinced that buildings and objects that persist over time, surviving wear and tear, are not examples of random events. There is some kind of energy, a sort of magic, that supports them. That magic translates into my photographs. In addition, old things are terrifically unique. There is all the energy that goes into making them originally, plus the energy of weather and time to morph them into agedness, plus the energy that allows them to persist and survive their morphing. The end result cannot be recreated in weeks or months. I also enjoy the mystery of speculating... What was it for? What did it originally look like?





Grocery Cart, Abandon, 2000-2011

There has been an interesting pattern with my photography that's caught my attention. Again and again, I'll see buildings, a bridge, a tight collection of old cottonwoods... familiar objects will have been torn down, fall down or be removed after multiple photography shoots. Am I called to the place via intuition so that I can photograph them before they go away? Or is my energy/magic theory correct and, by shooting them abundantly, I pull out the magic and leave them without protection? All of the oldest metal artifacts, dumped near to the water-powered factory (now revived), disappeared in the late aughts. All that remains are indentations in the ground. The area had come under the auspices of the Forest Preserve District of Kane County many years earlier. They may have seen the rusty metal as a liability risk, or they or their employees may have sold the scrap to the Chinese for profit. Of course, these events could be purely coincidental. In any event, I am glad to have photographed them in a timely fashion.



Hi, Christopher! You are a multi-disciplinary artist: music, film, performance, photography.

I earned a BA in Film from Columbia College Chicago in 1980. I taught myself still photography and darkroom techniques at the same time. My first photo sale, to the collection of Standard Oil of Indiana, was followed by a solo show and appearances in magazines and art exhibitions.



Christopher Paul Brown

After a long pause for parenting and work, I played in and produced two bands, *Random Touch* and *Bosch*, and spent the next 11 years making experimental music and videos. We performed live in the Chicago region and released 17 albums that saw radio play on US college radio stations as well as stations in London and Moscow. My videos appeared at South by Southwest, the New York Video Festival at Lincoln Center, the Boston Underground Video Festival, and many others, and my video, *You Define Single File*, was nominated for the Golden Gate Award at the 47th San Francisco International Film Festival.

During that time, my photography remained mostly a private artistic pursuit. I bought a Mamiya medium format camera, moved into

color and exhibited very large, four-by-four-foot prints in 2008 and 2009. In 2013, I began playing with digital photography and decided to return to the sustained marketing of my photographs. Since then, I've had numerous exhibitions, awards, and appearances in magazines, catalogs, and hard-cover books. In the last three years, I have exhibited twice in Rome, Italy, and once in Belgrade, Serbia. Ten images from my series *Obscure Reveal* were shown in a museum in Florida.

Do you see a connection among your works in all the different media you've used?

Everything I've done in art, video, and music has been based on improvisation and the straddling of polar opposites such as intent/openness, obscure/reveal and work/play. I expect surprise, synchronicity, and serendipity to show up in the final result. I have likened the work to alchemy, the process of revelation in which an artist uses the power of polarities to connect to new meanings.

I was exposed to this alchemical approach to making art via a dozen LSD trips between 1971 and 1975. Where I had once wished to work on the frontiers of science while pursuing art as a hobby, the experience of LSD showed me that the real frontier of our times is inner space and a deeper understanding of alchemy.

Abandon?

The title *Abandon* refers, of course to what happened to these objects. However, "abandon" also refers to a lack of inhibition or restraint. In my childhood, I had a one mile radius from my home at my disposal, but the area where these images were made was out-of-bounds by parental decree. We had to make sure we entered the area unseen from any houses or cars. Later, as an adult, my one, two, and three-hour safaris with my camera also felt like a state of abandon. Where might I go this time? How might I get there? What might I find? While I may have had a time limit, for the duration of each trip it was just me, my

camera, and the hunt; the rest of the world fall away for a time.

Many of us treasure that sensation of freedom, timelessness, and working in "the zone."

Yes, the zone. I lose myself there such that I sometimes don't entirely identify my work/play as my own. I see my hand in it, yet it also feels like a discovery of something pre-existing. As it's being created, I feel more like a conduit or channel for energies beyond my ken. A trance-like state overcomes me, and all I know is that I'm in the flow. When I improvise music with two other musicians, the process is exponential, simply because three of us put out perhaps nine times the intention



Flaming Guitar

and openness of a single person. Almost always I entered a state where I have no awareness of my part. I only hear the whole, and my eyes may be closed. It's like a train is roaring past me and I am supporting its passage. Sometimes, but more rarely, I move a step further into trance and I find myself in a play. I know my lines and my actions, and those of the people around me. As we act out this play

the outcome is the music. I am like a vessel and the music is the liquid pouring out of me. It's like a lucid dream. Afterward, I neither remember making the piece nor entirely recognize it as my own. Art-making on my own is less dramatic, but I am still overtaken by a trance-like dreaminess.

I come to art not just in the role of the alchemist, but also the mystic. I have talked to star-beings, trees have told me how they got the idea for veins, and I have altered the past. For those who understand astrology, I have Jupiter and Uranus in the 12th house, Pluto in the first house, 4 planets in water and none in earth, and my Moon is in Pisces. I am built to make art. I literally can't help myself.

This project has lasted 11 years! Are there advantages or disadvantages to long-term projects like this one?

Well, it certainly served a good purpose. From 2000 to 2012, I produced, co-created and marketed 17 music albums, and from 2002 to 2007 I made a similar number of experimental videos. These were each very collaborative affairs. The *Abandon* series and other series from that time frame gave me quality alone time in nature. I needed to get away from my computer and people and make art by myself. Photographing several big projects served these purposes grandly.

Keep in mind that I probably felt I had an *Abandon* series by 2005, but I just kept going out and finding more images to add to the series. Given my other commitments, it moved forward slowly at times, but I never wavered in my enjoyment and excitement. A series on my computer may contain 20-something, 50-something, even 100-something images. When it comes time to choose ten or fourteen for a gallery or eleven for *Dek Unu*, it's fun finding the right combination that works both singly and as part of the whole.

Experimental art has friends and foes. How do you react to people who "just don't get it?"

After digesting a periodical in which three of my works were published, a musician friend said he loved my work, that he really enjoyed a lot of the writing, and while none of the other art was bad, it differed from mine in one way. He said that when he looked at the other art he felt it was saying, "Let me show you my imagination." Whereas looking at mine incited his imagination.

Everyone has different aesthetics. One person's favorite color is blue and another's is yellow. I'm delighted that some people do like my work, and I love these artifacts of my work/play, but I don't expect everyone to feel the same. One of my brothers and a close friend both love much of my art but are disinterested in entire subsets. That said, I feel a little irked when I suspect my art is dismissed for ideological reasons. I'm thinking along the line of Tom Wolfe's *The Painted Word* here.

I have a theory about people having invisible antennae. I believe that all thoughts and changes come from outside our world. Think Plato's cave, where the viewers of shadows are unaware of the fire casting them. Think of the invention of calculus or manned flight. In each case widely separated people invented these things independently and at the same time. I believe this is because the ideas of calculus and manned flight were saturating the ether at each of these times. But thoughts can only be picked up when the receiver has the right antennae configuration. So what happens first is that some of the people grow new antennae, and then the idea is released. This minority with the new antennae get the idea, and a subset of them begin acting on it, and a further subset succeed. The same thing happens with art and music. What would a contemporary of Bernini make of the work of Milton Avery or Helen Frankenthaler? Likely they couldn't make anything of it. They wouldn't have the antennae, so they wouldn't have the aesthetics and certainly not the context. I suspect that over time more people will have newly configured antennae and the consequent aesthetics will allow them to grok not just my work, but many other new things.

Some say the most expensive art supply is time. How do you balance family / art / real life commitments?



Family

I managed these poorly in the old days. Both my first and second wives viewed my art and music as if they were my mistresses. Since I am American and not French, this was a problem. I have since solved it by divorcing twice and dating infrequently. I do have five kids, and, until last year, the youngest three were homeschooled. This meant a lot of driving to tutors and classes around town, but this just served as a break from the computer. When they were younger, we might, on a Tuesday morning, watch *Pee Wee's Playhouse* for an hour over breakfast. I would gladly forego a stretch at the computer to hang with them and I have always been good at working for just 20 minutes when the time arises. When possible I leave a project at an attractive point, where the tedious setup is already done. As a result, I can gleefully start my day with a cup of tea and Photoshop, before even reading my email. It's been easy for me these past 19 years as I sold my equity in a private company to a public company in 2000. I haven't had a "day" job since mid 2001.

There's a moment when both the shutter and photography "click." Do you remember making your first decent photo?

During winter break of my '77/'78 college year, I bought a Contax RTS 35mm camera and a Zeiss lens. I carried it everywhere and shot a lot on the streets of Chicago's loop. One day on Wabash I shot out of a cab (or the el train – it was a while ago) and caught a young man running. Later, with a loupe and the contact print, I saw that part of his image was blurred with motion and that made the image magic; all around him was a faithful, if black and white, reproduction of the scene of the street, people, and a store. The blur alone was something the everyday eye doesn't encounter. I hadn't yet found Lartigue. I saw with that image that photography's limits were where its best assets lay, and I felt inspired to play and dance around those limits. The image also confirmed that the camera was right for me.

Do you remember the person who first steered you into the arts? Other mentors or influences?

I remember vividly sitting in the fourth grade while the "art lady" visited our class. She was a volunteer with an interest in art and would arrive armed with 8" X 10" prints of famous artwork and stories about the artists. The day she showed us a Wassily Kandinsky was a revelation to me. It was like the world changed and I could never go back to the previous normal. Subsequent artists rocked me, but never so much as that day in class. I've already given a shout out to Lartigue, but I particularly identify Milton Avery, Georges Braque, Harry Partch, Theodor Geisel and Vincent van Gogh as influencers. The ones who trusted themselves, no matter where their art took them, helped to show me the way.

Over the years, what have you found most satisfying about this work?

My satisfaction comes from several sources. I adore when I am surprised. I'll try something unexpected and boom – it's a home run hit, and I didn't see it coming. Marketing success is always

satisfying. These artifacts I discover/create all want to be seen, so it feels good when someone wants to display them. Lastly, I find satisfaction in the simple process of working on a piece of art. This is the exact opposite pole to the unexpected surprise. Many times I am working on something that will never see the light of day, though I don't yet know that. I am tweaking and polishing and improving it, slow minute by slow minute, hopeful it will emerge as something beyond the ordinary. Although photo-manipulation is often slow, it is bliss when I find the same non-stop, in-the-moment flow that I achieved through my work in purely improvised music.

And the most difficult thing?

The most difficult feature of my work is my reliance on computers. The endless upgrades to operating systems and the need to access the internet mean that I have to buy new equipment periodically and that entails reloading software and this often means a diminished quality of software. Adobe continually dumbs down Photoshop in order to appeal to casual users. I use an old version, CS6, which is not officially supported. Lastly, it's a big job to keep my electronic file storage safe and backed up. I've seen many disk failures; my 15 TB Drobo once failed on its internal system, and I couldn't get my files back for months (Drobo customer support draws from the shallow end of the pool). I moved out of the Chicago area in 2011 and no longer have access to top-notch Apple computer gurus.

The biggest issue for me is the static quality of working on a computer. Ergonomically, it is inferior to the darkroom, music-making, and even video making. Only fiction writing is equally static. This means that only in the morning can I go three or four hours straight. After that, I seldom exceed two-hour increments. Living, working, and sleeping in the same space means I often have to get away in my car. Often I go to coffee shops and have tea and visit with friends.

Artists are often out-spoken critics. Are you drawn to any particular style or approach? Anything that turns you off?

Goodness, don't get me started!

What turns me off? The conflation of artistic photo-journalism with art. Art as activism. Art as concept. Photography as separate from art. Art as a Disneyland ride...

Among the most highly paid living artists, I like only David Hockney. The rest strike me as imposters. In all this there are exceptions to the rule, but the exceptions are akin to the suburban Ohio housewife who has a monster casino win at the slots; these exceptions are there to give the appearance that it is not a corrupt system.

We live in an upside-down world. The Hindus captured it well when they identified the past 5,000 years as the Kali Yuga. They say this period is identified by leaders who are the worst people for the job (politicians, business people, bureaucrats, spiritual leaders, artists, musicians, entertainers) and by everyone being a slave to their tongue (gossip, opinions, food, drink, sex). Our society has replaced the prominence of traditional religion with the hidden religion of science. The mind, which at best is a disciplined servant, has been raised to the status of master. We approach the unknowable not through priests but via doctors and prostituting science researchers. We conflate the income-generating novelties created by engineers with lofty science.

In the arts, we teach everyone, from the blue-collar to the uber-wealthy, that art is too arcane to be understood without interpretation. In my view, words can describe 50% of the world ordinarily. Poets may expand this to 55%. Yet we are told by authorities that the world is comprehensible only through words. Ambitious bureaucrats choose which artists gain access to the middle tiers, and art advisors choose which artists achieve the upper tiers. Both hang their methods on words instead of art.

Thanks, Chris. Great fun! How can we keep in touch?

I have work in "The Shape of Things" at Praxis Gallery, Minneapolis, from October 24 to November 16. I will be in the November issue of *Tatterhood Review* and the Fall 2020 issue of *Gasher Magazine* will include six of my pieces starting December 1. And I'm always at my links:

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Christopher Paul Brown In Print



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